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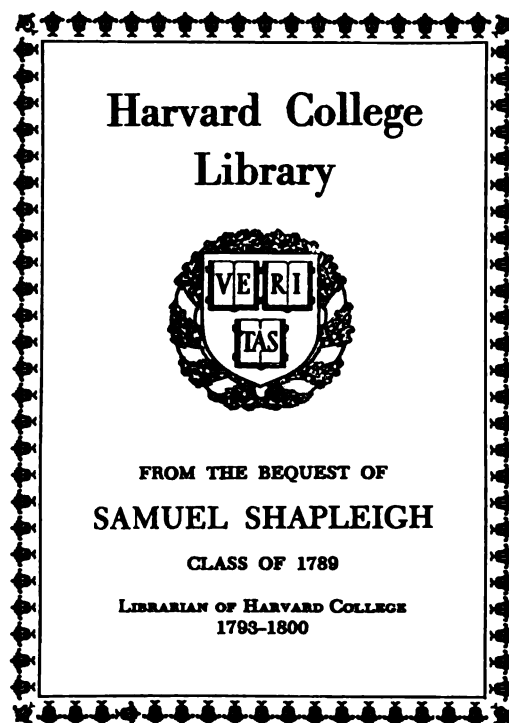
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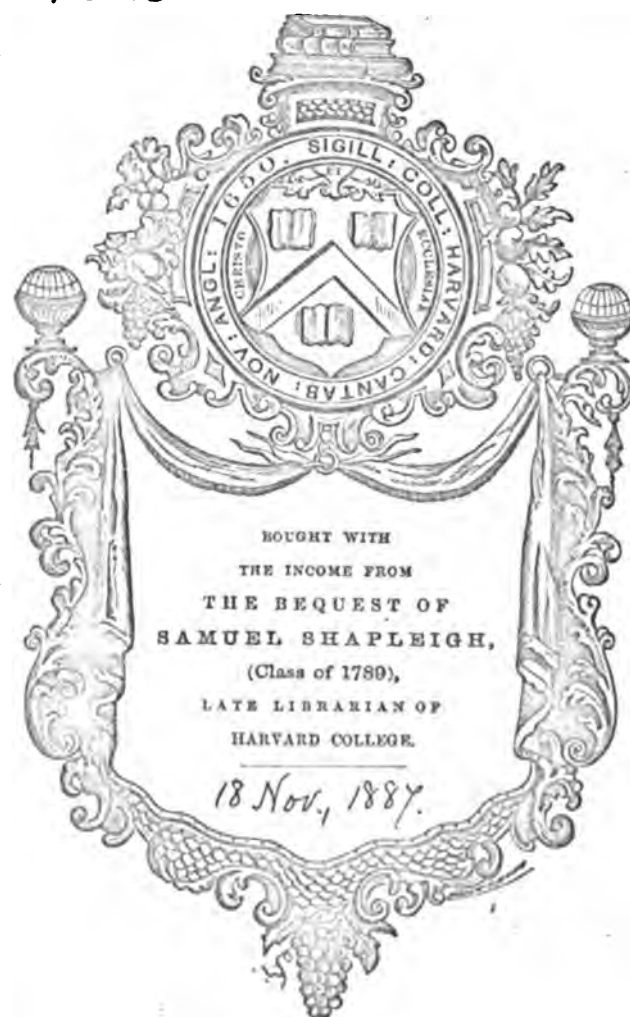
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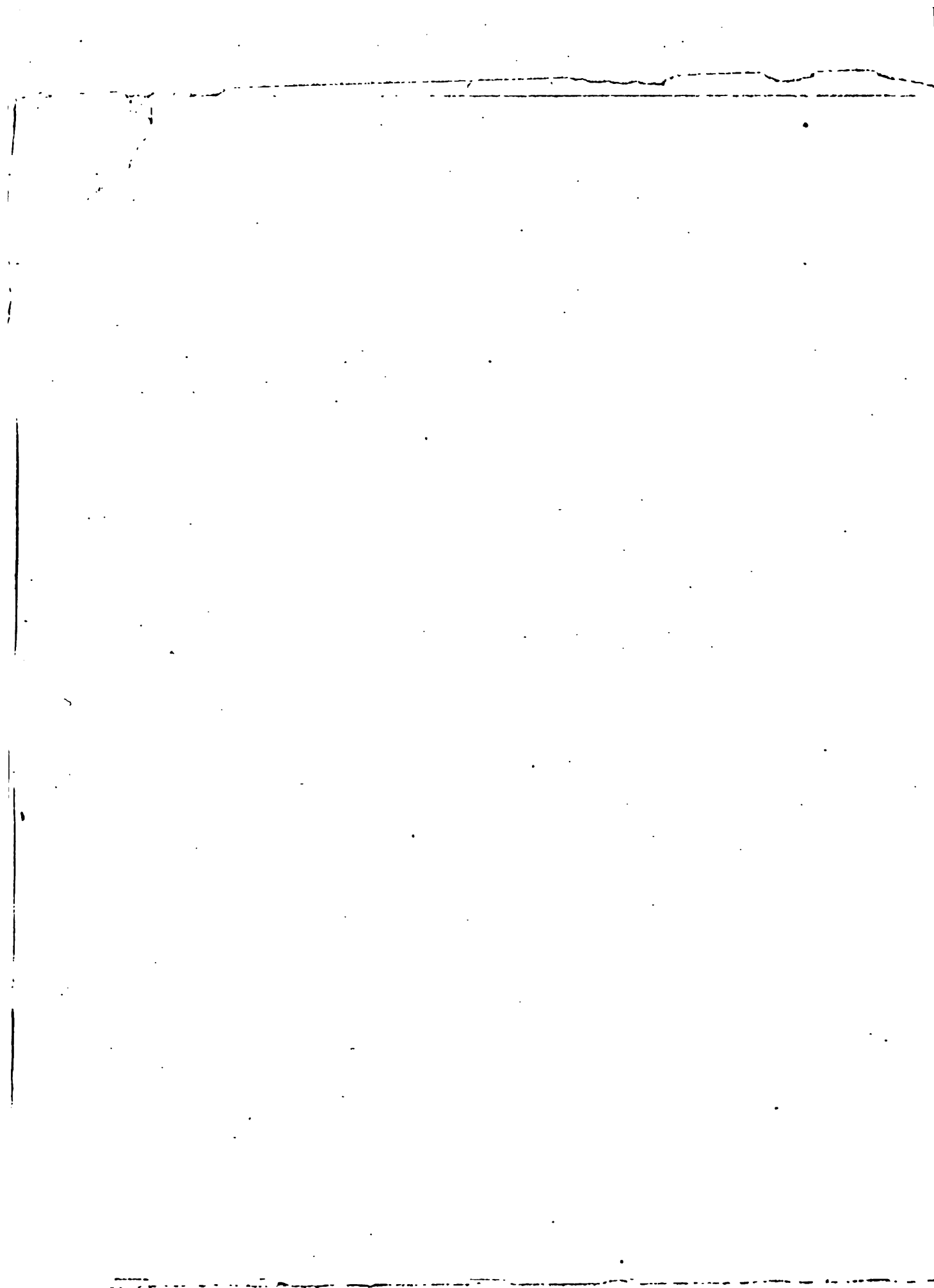
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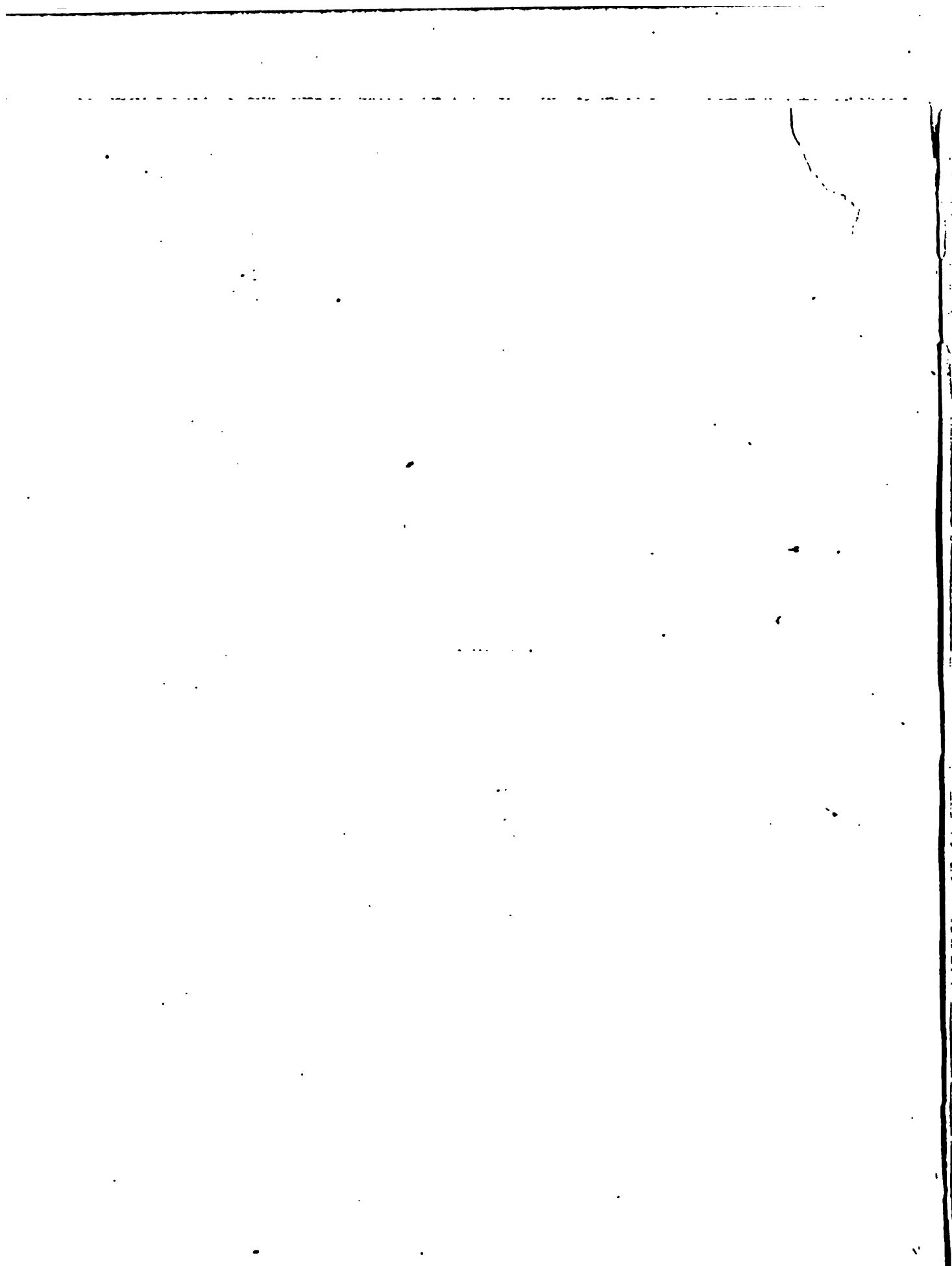
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Ostern 1887.

An Essay
on
Tennyson's Idylls of the King.

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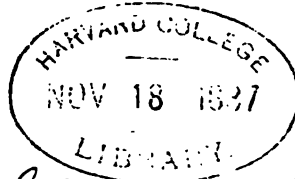
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The Arthurian legend has at all times exercised a strong fascination on the imagination of the English people. The Celtic hero whose mighty deeds shed all the glories of an autumn sunset on the downfall of the British race, is not regarded as an enemy by the Saxon conquerors; he is to them a truly national king and a Christian, the earliest combination of heroic valour and of Christian feeling which appeared on English soil, the first type of the gentleman England produced; and so he was and so he is to the English the ideal of manhood, the ideal Englishman. Such he appears in the chivalric romances of the middle ages, such in Spenser's *Fairy Queen*, — that brilliant revival of the romantic spirit in the age of the Renaissance, — such at last in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. To a nation of shopkeepers, to a money-getting and selfish generation, to whom ease and comfort sometimes seem dearer than national honour, the poet wishes to hold up the image of the man who looks with lofty disdain down upon all meanness and littleness, who stakes his all to set up a standard of human perfection and ideal purity, and nobly perishes in an imperishable cause. And such a man England has seen and called her own in our own time, though she did not fully appreciate him till he was taken away, another Arthur to whose memory Tennyson in his *Dedication to the Queen* consecrates his *Idylls of the King*, — Prince Albert in whose life, devoted as it was to the noblest purposes, even „the fierce light that beats upon a throne“ could disclose no stain, he

Who revered his conscience as his king;
Whose glory was redressing human wrong;
Who spake no slander, no, nor listen'd to it;
Who loved one only and who clave to her.

He is dead, all jealousy is hushed at last, and he is seen now as he was: —

How modest, kindly, all-accomplish'd, wise,
With what sublime repression of himself —
Wearing the white flower of a blameless life,
Before a thousand peering littlenesses.

And so the greatest poet of the England of the age of Victoria lays his greatest poem down at the foot of the throne as a token of sympathy with the great sorrow of the life of his Queen.

History of the legends of Arthur; Tennyson's Sources.

The death-struggle of the Celts, once the ruling race of Western Europe, took place in Britain. For two centuries the tide of victory rolled upward and downward between the German Ocean and the wild mountains of Wales, until at last the former lords of the island were pent up in the rugged mountain fastnesses of the West, whilst the Saxon invaders held

the fertile tracts from the Severn to the Eastern and Southern seas. But the spirit of the Britons was not crushed, they waited for a turn of the tide; in the meantime they lived on hopes and memories. Both were embodied in their legendary hero, King Arthur, who had held the heathen invader at bay by deeds of incomparable prowess. It is true that his tomb was pointed out in the Abbey of Glastonbury where the hero was buried in the year 542, but the air was full of old traditions and prophecies that Arthur was not dead, that he had been transferred to some blissful country, a terrestrial paradise, the Isle of Avalon, from where he should return in the fulness of time to fight once more that last decisive battle of Camlan against Modred the traitor and the Lords of Hengist and to drive the Saxon conquerors back into the sea over which they had invaded Britain like ravenous wolves. In the 11th century the Saxon power declined rapidly, the hopes of the Welsh rose high, fired by the songs of their bards. When the Norman Kings attempted to extend their sway over Wales, they met with desperate resistance. During the weak rule of John and of Henry III the Lords of Snowdon, Llewelyn ap Iorwerth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd (1195—1282) united in their hands the whole power of Wales, and when Edward I ascended the throne, the time seemed to have arrived to realise the long cherished dream of revenge. These hopes were crushed by the great victory of Edward; Llewelyn died in battle, his brother David, the last of a great race, perished like a felon on the gallows. A prince of Wales did rule over all England, but it was a son of the conqueror, Edward II, born in Carnarvon Castle.

This great and last national rising of the Celtic race went hand in hand with a wonderful outburst of national poetry. „In every house“, says an English observer of the time, „strangers who arrived in the morning were entertained till eventide with the talk of maidens and the music of the harp.“ The characteristic feature of this poetry is the startling freedom of fancy. The gay extravagance of those „Mabinogion“ or tales which reach their highest perfection in the legends of Arthur, sets at defiance all fact, tradition, or probability. „The world of the Welsh poets is a world of pure phantasy, a new earth of marvels and enchantments, of dark forests whose silence is broken by the hermit's bell, and sunny glades where the light plays on the hero's armour. Each figure as it moves across the poet's canvass is bright with glancing colour, everywhere there is an Oriental profusion of imagery.“ The central character of this poetry is King Arthur; gradually the story of the Table Round develops itself. There is at that time an intimate connection between Brittany and Wales, held together by the same language, the same traditions, whilst England and Normandy obey the same ruler and speak the same idiom, the langue d'oïl. A marriage draws these two groups of countries nearer together; Henry II marries his son Geoffry to Constance, the heiress of Brittany. The son, born from this marriage, is called after the national hero: Arthur, the real heir to the throne at the death of Richard Coeur de Lion, intended to crown the hopes of the Celtic inhabitants of England, an Arthur on the throne of Britain, springing through his mother from the old British stock. It is the time when Henry II visited the tomb of the legendary king in the old abbey of Glastonbury. These facts prove the gradual spreading of the great Welsh legend across the border among Englishmen, Normans, and Frenchmen; they are intelligible only if we take into account the eager interest which had been excited among those nations by the important collection of Welsh tales given to the

astonished contemporaries in a Latin version by Geoffry of Monmouth — born 1128 — under the name of a *Historia Britonum*, the daring fabulist who boldly mingled together old myths and legends, the Celtic dreams of a future triumph, and the memories of the Crusades as well as of the worldwide dominion of Charlemagne. This book became the fountain head from which the nations of Europe gradually drew the legends of Arthur and of the Table Round. Brittany added the older tradition of the enchanter Merlin and that of Lancelot, a subject which was by degrees moulded by the minstrels into the familiar song of Knighthood wrested from its loyalty by guilty love. Also the stories of Tristram and Gawaine seem to have been independent at first; but could not resist the attractive force of the Arthurian legend. The edifice was crowned when the legend of the San Graal was interwoven with the story of the Table Round. This legend undoubtedly took its rise in the Church, which was jealous of the success of these purely chivalrous and worldly romances. As the Church had forced Knighthood to contribute to its interests and majesty by the foundation of the Orders of Chivalry, it now put its stamp on the great body of romances by inventing and intertwining with them the masterpiece of the fictions of that romantic age, the legend of the sacred cup which contained the holy blood visible only to the eye of the pure in heart, and which provides for the elect all earthly wealth and profusion and all heavenly happiness. To connect this legend with the tales of Arthur this poem fixes on the person of Joseph of Arimathaea, who in all the four gospels is represented as a rich and pious man and a disciple of the Lord who buries the body of Christ in his own sepulchre. This Joseph is said to have saved the holy vessel and to have fled with it to Britain where he settled and built a chapel at Glastonbury. Arthur and his Knights are powerfully moved to seek for the holy cup and they wander over sea and land in the quest of the San Graal. At last the man of maiden purity, Sir Galahad, the ideal of the Christian Knight achieves the quest. The first poet who thus blended the spiritual with the purely chivalrous elements in these legends was Walter de Map (1150 — 1196).

The other connecting links between the Welsh original poems and the poetry of the rest of civilised Europe were the French version of Geoffry's History of the Britons by Robert Wace of Jersey, which appeared under the name of *Le Brut d'Angleterre* about 1155, and a free version of Wace's work increased by additions from Baeda written about 1210 in Old English by Layamon a priest at Earnley near Radstone on the banks of the Severn. This work, commonly called Layamon's Brut, acquainted the English-speaking common people with the legends of the Celtic King, whilst Wace's Brut d'Angleterre became the chief source from which the French trouvères drew their inspiration. The chief of these was Chrestien de Troyes, the author of the *Chevalier au Lion*; and through him and his contemporaries the great German poets at the time of the Suabian emperors obtained access to these stories; one of them, viz: Wolfram von Eschenbach, undoubtedly surpassed all the poets who at that time treated this subject, in depth of thought and grandeur of poetical conception.

Arthur remained the ideal of chivalry as long as chivalry was a living force; and it is a characteristic fact that one of the first books printed in England was a collection of the whole body of Arthurian legends in the prose narration of Sir Thomas Malory. This book called *Le Morte Darthur* was finished in 1469 and printed by Caxton

at Westminster in 1485. How much Arthur still occupied the imagination of the people of the time, appears from the fact that Henry VII called his eldest son Arthur; but the hopes of England to see once more an Arthur on the throne were again disappointed. When the sun of chivalry set at last with the end of the 16th century after the glorious revival of chivalrous feeling among those paladins of Elisabeth Sidney, Raleigh, Essex, it flashed forth once more in all its magnificence from the stanzas of Spenser's poem, whose hero was King Arthur.

Nor did the Welsh themselves after their final defeat forget their national hero; the old tales were told and retold from generation to generation, nay they were welcomed at the Welsh fireside even in the foreign garb in which they returned from their wanderings through the countries of Europe; and so the ancient and original stories and the modernised foreign additions and amplifications grew side by side and mingled with each other. A very interesting collection of such „Mabinogion“, as these romantic tales were called, still exists forming part of a famous manuscript in the Library of Jesus College, Oxford, called the *Llyfr Coch o Hergest* or Red Book of Hergest. It is a folio volume of 721 pages with double columns. Many of these tales refer to the heroes of the Arthurian cycle. The M. S. appears to have been written by various persons and at different times, not later than the end of the 15th century. These „Mabinogion“ have been published both in the original Welsh and in an English version with the addition of notes and of the French text of Chrestien's *Chevalier au Lion* by Lady Charlotte Guest, in 3 vols 1849.

The Mabinogion and Malory's *Morte Darthur* are the chief sources of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*; from the former he took the story of Enid and Geraint, from the latter the subjects of the other idylls. It is very interesting to study how the modern poet used the ancient material, but the reader will not be able to appreciate the consummate tact which Tennyson has shown in this task, before he has formed an idea of his poem itself; to this therefore we have now to turn our attention.

Tennyson preparing himself for his task.

Tennyson slowly and carefully prepared himself for his great subject. He was fifty years old when he published his first idylls (1859). Up to that time the contemporary world had known him only as a lyric poet, and even in this quality he had slowly arrived at distinction. His first collection of poetry — *Poems*, chiefly lyrical 1830, — did not give earnest of great power. Another pretty drawing-room poet seemed to have arisen, somewhat fastidious, over-refined, too highly polished, not masculine enough in thought and sentiment, though with an open eye for natural beauty and an exquisite ear for harmonious words and cadences. The second volume of 1832 revealed a marked progress towards truth, greater simplicity of style, a broader range of feeling, though there was still too much adornment and polishing. Among these poems we find *The Miller's Daughter*, a piece of great beauty and naturalness. Perhaps it was the passionate grief at the death of his friend Arthur Hallam (1833) that made him a great poet by saddening and deepening his whole nature. For nine years the poet collected his strength; when he reappeared before the public in 1842 there could no longer be a doubt that a lyric poet of the first order had arisen. *The Gardener's Daughter*, *Locksley*

Hall, Godiva show him in full possession of his power. He had now attained perfect command of rhythm and melody; the English language revealed in these poems all its hidden music, both its grand and rolling notes, and its sweet and melting accents. He appears as the poet of sensation, he sees all the forms of creation with the eye both of the keen observer and of the great painter, his ear has a fairy fineness. His sympathies are wide and deep, his sentiments refined and noble, his thoughts lofty and pure. He takes a passionate interest in the great political and social questions of the time, in its troubles and struggles. He is proud of the liberty and power and of the world-wide destinies of his country; he shows everywhere a free, bold, and manly spirit intimately blended with a chivalrous feeling of protecting love and pity for the weak, especially for woman. Exquisite are his female characters, with their infinite charms, their tenderness, their innocence and purity, their little caprices and waywardness, their coquetry, their deep and absorbing love. In two things he is unrivaled: in this delineation of woman and in the description of English scenery in its magic glamour of varying lights and shades, and tints of mellow hues.

And yet the poet undertook a still loftier flight, soaring into a higher and more solemn region. Seventeen years after the death of the friend of his youth he published 131 poems „In Memoriam“. The grief at the loss of the friend expands in this beautiful threnody into the wider sympathy with all the dark riddles and sorrows of human existence, but in this abyss the poet is not swallowed up by despair, he struggles upward through doubt to faith and submission. Having now touched every chord on the lyre of the poetry of the feelings and of reflection, Tennyson at last turned to the great task of his mature manhood: to build up the epic poem of his time and thereby to erect to himself a „monumentum aere perennius“.

The plan and fundamental idea of Tennyson's Idylls.

Tennyson chose as title for his work the very modest and apparently inadequate name of Idylls of the King. It is not to be supposed that he chose this name instead of a more ambitious one, because he had not clearly conceived the plan and idea of his whole work, when he published his first four idylls; for although they represent chapters taken at random out of the middle of the story, yet the idea which holds all the idylls together and which is embodied in the person of the King, is clearly traceable already in this first series. Perhaps the poet wished to reserve to himself full liberty of action; for this reason he invented a plan which allowed him to publish apparently unconnected episodes now out of the beginning, now out of the end, now out of the middle of his work; but above all Tennyson knew his public. The impatient modern reader hates nothing so much as a longwinded epic poem. If the author had waited until he was able to publish at once his entire work as a voluminous and wisely built up Whole, with the title: King Arthur, an epic poem in 12 books, — he would have frightened off the majority of readers and very few would have read the whole work. He preferred to lay before the public from time to time a small number of scenes from his great poem, each of them a finished little picture or idyll [*εἰδύλλιον*] by itself and yet in connection with the ground plan of the whole. Thus each of these had time to be fully appreciated by a public whose patience was not put to a severe test. Nay, public-curiosity was roused as

to the inner connection of these stories, and gradually the astonished reader saw with delight the great plan of the work develop itself as idyll after idyll appeared in slow but steady succession.

The idylls were published in the following order: In 1859 Enid, Vivien, Elaine, Guinevere; in 1867 The Coming of Arthur, the Holy Grail, Pelleas and Ettarre, the Passing of Arthur; in 1872 Gareth and Lynette, the Last Tournament; in 1885 Balin and Balan. But in the plan of the story they follow each other thus:

1. The Coming of Arthur. 2. Gareth and Lynette 3. Enid. 4. Balin and Balan. 5. Vivien. 6. Elaine. 7. The Holy Grail. 8. Pelleas and Ettarre. 9. The Last Tournament. 10. Guinevere. 11. The Passing of Arthur.

Before we set out on our expedition through the enchanted labyrinth of Tennyson's poem, we have to look out for the thread which will safely bring us to our journey's end. We ask then, what is the ideal bond which holds together the eleven links of the chain which the poet's fancy has forged.

Arthur appears as the saviour of his people both from foreign enemies and from its own corruption. He raises a new standard of ideal perfection and founds the Table Round of those whom he succeeds to inspire with his own spirit, with his passionate love of truth and righteousness; and indeed for a moment „all seem to bear the likeness of the king“. But soon the shining ideal which a great genius in a moment of divine inspiration created, grows dim with the rising mists of human frailty and littleness; the Paradise of innocence and heroic virtue cannot endure on earth. Sin breaks out in the most exalted place; Guinevere, Arthur's queen, is false to her husband. This one drop of poison slowly but irresistibly corrupts the whole organism. We see it spread in wider and wider circles until at last the whole body, that noble structure of the Table Round, is inwardly rotten; its soul is fled, and Arthur passes away, perhaps to return in some brighter future in a riper and better age. An eminently tragic subject, — the great and noble hearted man struggling in vain against a cold and sluggish world unable to understand or steadfastly to follow the ideal which he has set up before it. Even those he loves best and on whose help he relies prove faithless and desert him in his need. The ideal cannot be realised on earth, the light which an inspired Prometheus snatches from above to bring to the denizens of this earth, is slowly and surely swallowed up by darkness.

It may be that the whole poem is an allegory of human life: Arthur is the soul at war with the senses and earthly passions; it comes like Arthur we do not know whence, it passes like Arthur we do not know whither; it flutters, beats, and struggles in vain. There is a talk of a happy island valley of Avilion and of the return of the king to rule once more in bliss but

„who knows?

From the great deep to the great deep he goes.“

The poem is written in Blank Verse which Tennyson handles with the grace and power of Milton and Thomson.

Analysis of the Poem.

1. *The Coming of Arthur.* Fierce anarchy prevails in Britain; the Romans have grown too weak successfully to enforce their claim of sovereignty; the heathen barbarians

from Germany, — the Lords of Hengist, — and the savage Norsemen attack the country from without, robbers and outlaws harrass it within.

„And so there grew great tracts of wilderness
Wherein the beast was ever more and more
But man was less and less.“

After the death of Uther, the son of Aurelius, the country is without a king. Suddenly Arthur appears to put an end to this interregnum, and to deliver his country from its enemies, Who is he, this king „fair beyond the race of Britons and of men“? Is he, as some say, a son of Uther begotten with Gorlois' widow Ygerne, born before his time and secretly reared by the Enchanter Merlin and brought forward by him in the hour of need? or was he, as others maintain, in the terrible night of Uther's death, swept ashore as a tender babe on the shining crest of a huge wave and taken up by Merlin and his old master Bleys? Even Merlin would not give a straight-forward answer but spoke in riddles. But howsoever this be, Arthur proved his claim by deeds; he overthrew the foreign enemies in tremendous battles, he restored order, he defeated the rebellious barons who denied his legitimacy, and at his coronation he founded the famous order of the Table Round, binding his faithful knights by great vows to

„follow the Christ, the king,

Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the king.“

And „when they rose, knighted from kneeling, some
Were pale as at the passing of a ghost,
Some flush'd, and others dazed, as one who wakes
Half-blinded at the coming of a light,
And from eye to eye thro' all their Order flash'd
A momentary likeness of the king;
And ere it left their faces, thro' the cross
And those around it and the Crucified,
Down from the casement over Arthur, smote
Flame-colour, vert and azure, in three rays,
One falling upon each of three fair queens,
Who stood in silence near his throne, the friends
Of Arthur, gazing on him, tall, with bright
Sweet faces, who will help him at his need.“

And there was borne before him at his coronation his mysterious sword Excalibur¹⁾, „rich with jewels on the hilt, bewildering heart and eye“, which one summer-noon an arm „clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful“, had raised out of the bosom of a lake. Arthur had rowed himself to the spot and had taken it; and it bore „in the oldest tongue of all this world“ on the one side the inscription: Take me, and on the other: Throw me away! And with this sword and with his faithful knights, Arthur saved Leodagran, king of Cameliard, from his enemies, and in reward asked for the hand of his daughter, the most beautiful of women, Guinevere. And after Leodagran had collected all the evidence about the origin of Arthur he arrived at the conclusion that he was indeed the legitimate king of Britain, and he promised him his daughter. Then Arthur

¹⁾ According to another tradition which Malory follows, the famous sword was drawn by Arthur out of a stone in which it had been miraculously inserted, and from which no other man could draw it. This was the sign that he was the rightful king, and so he was accordingly claimed.

sent his dearest Lancelot, the bravest of the brave, to bring her to his court, and after the marriage-rite had been fulfilled, Arthur was victorious over all his enemies.

2. *Gareth and Lynette*. For a time the ideal is realised. Look at Arthur's royal seat, the magic city of Camelot, rising like a fairy-dream high into the air with a thousand tall spires, quaint turrets, pointed gables, and arched balconies, and see how

„all about a healthful people stept

As in the presence of a gracious king.“

And observe Arthur's knights assembled around their Lord hearing him give judgment to his people:

„in all the listening eyes

Of those tall knights, that ranged about the throne,

Clear honour shining like the dewy star

Of dawn, and faith in their great king, with pure

Affection, and the light of victory,

And glory gained, and evermore to gain.“

And all that is best and noblest in the land feels attracted by him as true steel by the magnet. Thus Gareth, the son of Lot and Bellicent, youngest brother of merry Gawaine and false Modred, and nephew of Arthur, cannot bear to sit idly at home, but yearns

„to sweep

In ever-highering eagle-circles up

To the great Sun of Glory, and thence swoop

Down upon all things base, and dash them dead.“

His mother Bellicent gives him leave to go on condition that he enters unknown into Arthur's service as a common kitchen knave. She hopes, like Herzeloide in the German poem, that her son will soon be disheartened by the mockery of the world and will return to his mother. But how nobly and bravely the boy takes the trial upon himself! Patiently he bears to be hustled and harried by the Royal Seneschal, Sir Kay, the envious and ill-tempered Thersites of the Table Round, if he can only see the king and Lancelot in the tournament! At last Bellicent relents and allows him to announce himself privately to Arthur, and when on the same day a distressed lady, the fair but saucy Lynette, appeals to the king for help against three wicked robber-knights, the brotherhood of Night and Day, who hold her sister Lyonors in durance, the brave young scullion offers himself as her champion, and though scorned and reviled by the haughty lady he conquers her oppressors one by one in fierce battle. How noble-hearted, how kind, how simple, obedient, and true he is! how blithely he carols his merry songs full of life, and youth, and hope. And at last he wins the greatest victory of all, he conquers Lynette's proud heart and carries off the prize.

3. *Enid*. The time of the youthful innocence of the Table Round is soon at an end. Already in the third idyll a cloud appears in the bright heaven; a rumour spreads that Guinevere is faithless to her lord. When Lancelot, Arthur's greatest knight, the Star of the Tournament, escorted Guinevere to the court of her destined husband, she did not yet know Arthur. It was springtime then and the air was full of love. When the two reached the court they woke as from a dream. Then Guinevere saw Arthur and thought him cold and distant, — „high, self-contained, and passionless“, she could not soar up to the serene height of his being, was dazzled by the pure white light; and reasoning

„he is all fault who hath no fault at all,
For who loves me must have a touch of earth;
The low sun makes the colour“, —

she turned her fancy to Lancelot whose innate nobleness and generosity were overcome by her irresistible charm and passionate love.

And the faint rumour which had begun to spread, reached the ear of Prince Geraint, who had just won the hand of lovely Enid; and fearing lest his wife's nature should receive a taint from her intimacy with Guinevere, he took her away from the court to his own dukedom and there, forgetful of his duties as a knight and as a prince, he idled away his life in tender passion at her feet, so that he became the laughing stock of his own people. Then Enid saddened at this and grieved that he had lost his prowess. He, noticing her melancholy, mistook the cause of it and thought that her virtue had been tainted at the court, and that she was secretly pining for some other knight. And so the poison rankled in his breast. At last he roused himself and set out on a desperate venture riding unattended and with utter carelessness through a lawless country swarming with robber-knights and dastardly miscreants. He forced Enid to ride before him forbidding her to speak to him or to warn him of any danger whatever befell. Thus he passed through fearful perils but always came out victoriously through his irresistible strength and bravery. At last however he was wounded in a fierce fight against terrible odds and carried senseless into the hold of Earl Doorm, the cruellest and wildest of those outlaws. Here in the banqueting hall of the Earl he recovered his consciousness just in time to hear his wife protest in accents of deepest anguish her love for her husband, her despair at his supposed death, and her passionate rejection of the offers of the enamoured knight. And then the earl incensed at the rebuke

„unknightly with flat hand,
However lightly, smote her on the cheek, —
Then Enid, in her utter helplessness,
And since she thought, „he had not dared to do it,
Except he surely knew my lord was dead“,
Sent forth a sudden sharp and bitter cry,
As of a wild thing taken in the trap,
Which sees the trapper coming thro' the wood.“

Hearing this cry Geraint suddenly rises from his bier like the ghost of himself, kills her tormentor at one stroke of his sword, and carries her safely back to his home, convinced at last of her faith and purity, and henceforth he is as valiant a warrior and just a prince as tender and devoted a husband. and at last crowns so noble a life with a glorious death in battle for his king.

4. *Balin and Balan.* In the fourth idyll the poet continues to trace the pernicious influence of that suspicion which begins to hang like a dark cloud round Arthur's queen and Arthur's dearest friend. The faith in ideal purity is shaken. Balin, a valiant knight of the Table Round, is generous and loyal but subject to sudden outbursts of a gloomy and passionate temperament. In one of his fits he wounded a man who had reviled him, wherefore the king called him „The Savage“ and banished him for three years from his court. He went into exile accompanied by his younger and gentler brother Balan. At last the brothers return and Balin is received again into favour and restored

to all his former honours. And now whilst Balan sets out on a dangerous expedition to cleanse a wood from a foul demon who haunts it as a shadowy spectre that „like slander“ kills the unwary traveler from behind, Balin remains among the knights of the Order striving with all his might to control his fierce soul and to rise to the ideal of knight-hood as which he regards noble Lancelot. And in order better to succeed in this arduous task he carries as a cognisance in his shield the crown of Guinevere who is to him the ideal of pure womanhood. But one day, concealed in an arbour of the royal garden, he overhears a conversation between the Queen and her first peer, which fills his soul with a dark suspicion; whereupon he passionately accuses himself of impurity distrusting rather himself than others, and despairing that he will ever conquer the baseness of his nature, he leaves the court in a mad passion to rush into the midst of some desperate adventure. In this mood he reaches the gloomy and desolate castle of King Pellam, an imbecile and monkish old man. Here the king's son, base and malignant Garlon, sneers at his simplicity in wearing the Queen's crown as a badge of purity. A quarrel breaks out and in fierce wrath Balin strikes the slanderer to the ground and escapes with great difficulty from the pursuers. Despairing altogether that he will ever conquer the demon in his breast, he hangs the queen's crown on a branch of a tree under which he throws himself down in passionate grief. At this moment a crafty and worldly lady of Arthur's court, fair and coquettish Vivien, passes near the place with her youthful squire singing a voluptuous love-song. Seeing the finely-made knight she assails him with her wily coquetry desiring to be escorted by him to the court. He refuses to return there, being, as he says, unworthy of seeing the Queen. She laughs at his simple faith and challenges her squire to bear witness to a slanderous story she tells of a secret meeting of Lancelot and the Queen at Caerleon upon Usk. The story seems to tally with his own experience and seeing his idols broken he gives vent to his pent-up passion, he rages, and breaks the shield with a savage yell. At this noise his brother Balan who still seeks for the Demon of the Wood, rushes forth from the thicket and seeing a knight with closed visor in the act of trampling on the royal crown, he, having also his visor lowered, attacks him furiously, and in the fearful encounter the brothers wound one another even to death. Laughing at their folly Vivien coolly leaves them to the wolves of the forest. They awake once more, lament each other's fate, and die „either lock'd in either's arm“, the first victims of the great crime.

5. *Vivien*. In the fifth idyll we see the shades darken around Arthur's noble edifice. Wise Merlin is the second victim. When Guinevere's faithlessness had become the talk of the court, cunning Vivien had tried to attract Arthur's attention through her coquettish charms,

„at which the king
Had gazed upon her blankly and gone by.“

The scene had been noticed and her discomfiture had roused the scorn and mockery of the knights and ladies of the court. It is the example of the queen who enjoys at the same time the homage of veneration due to Arthur's wife and the sweet delights of a clandestine intercourse with the most admired of all the knights, that corrupts Vivien's whole nature, giving rapid growth to all those seeds of low passion which otherwise might have remained dormant in her. She expresses herself the destructive

influence of the one unsound spot in Arthur's noble structure, and the fatality which working from this point will sap the very foundations of the fabric, in the following words:

„It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.

The little rift within the lover's lute,
Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit,
That rotting inward slowly moulders all.“

Foiled in her attempt to subdue Arthur by her charms, she turns to the second great conquest, that of wise Merlin; for to obtain absolute power over him, to quench the fire of that mighty soul would satisfy her vanity and make her feared at the court which now laughs at her, and which she hates and despises. In a fit of gloomy melancholy old Merlin has retired into the wild forest of Broceliande. She follows him, and with her wily playfulness she coils herself around him like a glittering snake. It is a sultry evening, a storm is gathering, the air is charged with electricity. The old Sage has told Vivien of a charm he knows „of woven paces and of waving hands“, to make a man insensible, dead to name and fame. She tries all her arts to wile the secret out of him, at one time all the blandishments of her voluptuous charms, at another anger and rage at his distrust. It is the old story of Samson and Dalila. At last, when the long suspended storm bursts with terrible thunder and fierce flashes of lightning, the old man has succumbed to the caresses of the lovely syren and has told her the spell, and is fallen asleep. Then Vivien practises the strange charm on him, and there he lies in the hollow of an oak-tree like one dead, lost to himself and to the world, and Vivien turns away triumphing like the Serpent after the fall of Adam.

6. *Elaine*. In the sixth idyll the principal figures of the poem appear themselves before us, and the interest of the story reaches its climax in the tragic fate of sweet Elaine who, ignorant of the adulterous passion of Guinevere, has fixed her maiden affection on Lancelot. She saw him for the first time at her father's castle of Astolat where he had strayed losing his way whilst he journeyed to Arthur's diamond-jousts in which he wished to fight in disguise. The innate nobility of his soul had not been quenched by his criminal passion and though —

„the great and guilty love he bore the Queen,
In battle with the love he bore his Liege
Had marred his face, and mark'd it ere his time“ —

there was a charm about this hero of the battle-field and of the tournament, the graceful and accomplished courtier, the generous and high-minded gentleman, which was irresistible; and that fitful melancholy which resulted from the constant war between his conscience and his passion, heightenend the mysterious fascination which he exercised, and to which the innocent and inexperienced maid of Astolat at once succumbed. So when he continued his journey leaving his shield behind in order not to be recognised in the lists, she sat for days in her tower wrapt in sweet dreams looking at it and thinking of its master, her peace gone, her heart heavy.

Lancelot was victorious in the tournament, though his own kinsmen, not knowing him, attacked him in a body so that he received a dangerous wound. Despairing of his

life, he rode away from the lists without claiming the prize or making himself known. At last he reached a hermit's cell, a cave near the seashore and there he lay down and would have died, had not Elaine discovered his hiding place and nursed the wounded hero with such loving devotion that she saved his life. But whilst he recovered his life, she sickened, for her love had now become her life, and she felt that his thoughts were not with her. At last the hour of parting came; then she could bear it no longer and spoke out:

„I have gone mad! I love you! let me die!“

Lancelot pitied her and not insensible to her wondrous beauty and maiden innocence he sighed at the thought of what might have been, but he was loyal to his disloyal love:

„His honour rooted in dishonour stood,

And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.“

And so he left her to return to the court whilst she pined away in spite of her father's and her brothers' anxious care. Then

„death, like a friend's voice from a distant field

Approaching thro' the darkness call'd.“

But before she passed away, she dictated a letter to Sir Lancelot which she wished herself to carry to the proud man. So when she was dead, a barge was hung with black from stern to stern, and a bier was placed on it decked out with black samite, and on the bier the lovely maid was laid. There was a faithful old servant in her father's house whose tongue had been cut out by the heathens. He undertook to steer the barge up the river with the rising tide to the castle of Arthur.

„Then rose the dumb old servitor, and the dead

Steer'd by the dumb went upward with the flood —

In her right hand a lily, in her left

The letter — all her bright hair streaming down —

And all her coverlid was cloth of gold.

Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white

All but her face, and that clear-featured face

Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead

But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled.“

At the same time Lancelot stood with the Queen in an oriel window of the palace overlooking the river and presented to her the rich jewels which he had won for her in the nine great diamond-jousts. But Guinevere who had heard of his stay at Astolat and how Elaine had nursed him, was writhing in the pangs of bitter jealousy and in a fit of frantic passion she seized the magnificent stones and flung them into the stream.

„Then while Sir Lancelot leant, in half disgust

At love, life, all things, on the window ledge,

Close underneath his eyes, and right across

Where these had fallen, slowly past the barge

Where-on the lily maid of Astolat

Lay smiling, like a star in blackest night.“

And having read the touching letter Lancelot sighed like a fallen angel over a lost paradise, and then already the thought may have arisen in his soul to atone for his great sin by retiring from the world.

Lancelot
never sins
or repents

7. *The Holy Grail.* The infection spreads in ever widening circles; the question now arises: is there indeed any one left in the Table Round who is still faithful to his vow? is there any one in the Order still worthy to receive the highest revelation from above, to see the Holy Grail? the sacred cup out of which the Lord drank at the Last Supper, which was deposited by its Keeper, Joseph of Arimathaea, at Glastonbury in the West of England, and, when the heathens reappeared in the land, was taken up to heaven, but which, it was hoped, would reveal itself again in the fulness of time. At last a holy nun, Percivale's sister, after long fasting and praying saw it in the dead of night in her cell.

And „O my brother, Percivale“, she said,
„Sweet brother, I have seen the Holy Grail:
For, waked at dead of night, I heard a sound
As of a silver horn from o'er the hills
Blown, and I thought, „It is not Arthur's use
To hunt by moonlight“; and the slender sound
As from a distance beyond distance grew
Coming upon me — O never harp nor horn,
Nor aught we blow with breath, or touch with hand,
Was like that music as it came; and then
Stream'd thro' my cell a cold and silver beam,
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,
Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive,
Till all the white walls of my cell were dyed
With rosy colours leaping on the wall;
And then the music faded, and the Grail
Pass'd, and the beam decay'd, and from the walls
The rosy quiverings died into the night.“

And then Percivale and many other knights fasted and prayed that they might see it too; among these was Galahad, a youth of maiden purity clad in white armour. And one night when Arthur was absent from his castle having gone to punish some rebels in the North, and when his knights were sitting in the Royal Hall at Camelot and eagerly talking of the object they had set their hearts upon, suddenly a tremendous clap of thunder was heard and the whole building seemed to be wrapped in flame, and then the Grail came floating in on a beam of light

„all over covered with a luminous cloud“,
and the faces of all the knights shone, but none but Galahad saw the holy cup itself. Then many took the vow to go in quest of the grail for a year and a day. But when Arthur returned, he grieved to see his Order crippled by this quest, nor did he approve of the vow. For to him the ideal of manhood is not an ascetic enthusiast leading a self-centred inner life of religious exaltation and bent only on saving his own poor self from eternal perdition, but an active hero, fighting the battle of life in the very midst of the struggle, beating down the tyranny of wrong and of selfishness, and breaking the chains which fetter virtue and innocence. However a knight must be true to his word, and so Arthur lets his friends depart though in bitter sorrow. And with few exceptions they are doomed to disappointment. Some die in the quest, others, like Lancelot, come to the conclusion that they are not worthy of the holy task they have undertaken. Per-

civale after many bitter disappointments, doubts, and inward struggles finds a pious hermit who tells him that he will not see the grail unless he be as humble as Galahad. He alone sees the grail ever floating before him. At last, meeting Galahad and taking the holy sacrament together with him, Percivale too beheld the great mystery revealed to his exalted soul, for

„he saw the fiery face as of a child
That smote itself into the bread and went.“

But Galahad passes away before the eyes of Percivale who watches him from a high hill, following in shining glory over a mystic bridge of innumerable arches the holy Grail which ever floats before him, until he vanishes in a sea of light. And then Percivale turned away from the world and found peace in a monk's cowl.

Thus there are many gaps in the Table Round and those who have returned look wan and ghostlike, and a gloom settles deeper and deeper on Arthur's Order.

8. *Pelleas and Ettarre*. New knights are made to fill up the gaps left by the quest of the Grail, none nobler and loftier of soul than Sir Pelleas of the Isles, the hero of the eighth idyll. Young, fresh, and ignorant of the world, he still believes in truth and virtue and in the ideal chivalry of the Table Round. In the Tournament of Youth, from which the older knights keep aloof, he wins the prize, a costly sword for himself, a golden circlet for his lady-love. This lady is Ettarre, a woman of great beauty, but worldly and depraved; she sneers at the maiden bashfulness and inexperience of Pelleas. However she allows him to enter the lists as her champion availing herself of his strong arm to win the circlet. But when he presents it to her and expects his reward, she slights his love and laughs him to scorn. Believing this to be a trial of his faith he follows her humbly to her castle and being shut out from it at the order of the lady by the raising of the draw-bridge, he abides outside the walls for days, mocked at and insulted by Ettarre's retainers. Disgusted with his perseverance she even sends her chief knights to assail, nay to kill him, but he overthrows them all and stays. At last his pride rises and he is on the point of turning away from the castle, when Gawaine, Arthur's merry nephew, arrives and pledges himself that he will, within a week, tame the pride of that haughty woman and force her to sue for the pardon of the offended lover; at the same time he promises on oath that, whatever befall, he will be loyal to Pelleas. So they exchange armour, weapons, and horses, and Gawaine blows his horn before the castle announcing his name and declaring that he has rid the lady of her persecutor by killing him in single fight. Ettarre receives him with transport delighted to have thus exchanged a raw and over-virtuous boy for the gayest and most fascinating cavalier in Arthur's court.

Impatiently in the mean-time Pelleas waits for the end of the week, Gawaine does not return. At last, in a lovely summer night, he sets out towards the castle, finds access into the garden, sees magnificent pavillions spread on beds of flowers, a great feast has just been celebrated, now all is wrapt in voluptuous sleep under the peaceful light of the summer-moon. He cautiously enters the richest of those tents and finds in it Ettarre asleep and faithless Gawaine by her side. But even now he restrains his wrath, but only lays the sword he won in the tournament athwart their naked throats, then disappears. In his despair he rides furiously to the convent where Percivale lives

in holy seclusion, and worn out with bodily weariness and mental torture he sinks into a deep but troubled sleep. At last he starts from it with the words still uttered in his dream:

„False! and I held thee pure as Guinevere!“

When thereupon Percivale reveals to him the whole truth about their Queen, the noble young knight utters a wild cry of despair. The fair world in which he believed with devoted enthusiasm lies shattered at his feet in wreck and ruin, and he rushes away in mad rage to take revenge for the loss of all that was dear to him. In this mood he meets Sir Lancelot and attacks him furiously:

„A scourge am I,

To lash the treason of the Table Round!“

But he is easily thrown off his weary horse and lies on the ground at the mercy of the Great Offender, — such is the justice of God's judgment in the duel! Lancelot generously spared his life; but when they entered Arthur's Hall together, the Queen saw from the look that Pelleas gave her, that her secret was a secret no longer, and she quailed in the consciousness of her guilt; and false Modred, the King's ambitious nephew, thought:

„The time is hard at hand.“

9. *The Last Tournament* reveals a startling picture of moral anarchy. Arthur perceives the degeneracy of his Order and tasks Lancelot:

„— have I dream'd the bearing of our knights
Tells of a manhood ever less and lower?
Or whence the fear lest this my realm, uprear'd,
By noble deeds at one with noble vows,
From flat confusion and brute violences,
Reel back into the beast, and be no more?“

A Mock Table Round has been founded in the North by a band of lawless robbers who defy Arthur's authority and laugh at the hypocritical sanctity of his knights. Arthur collects his younger knights to march with him against these outlaws. In the meantime he leaves Lancelot to preside at a great tournament which, in remembrance of a sweet maiden babe that Arthur and Lancelot once found in an eagle's nest at the top of a tree and that died in the arms of Guinevere, is called the Tournament of the Dead Innocence. The prize for which the jousts are held is a ruby carcanet or necklace which had been found twined round the neck of the child. To do honour to the stainless little maid all the ladies present in the lists are robed in stainless white. It is a gloomy, lowering autumn day with passing showers and fitful gusts of wind; the whole scene seems a mockery, for which Dead Innocence is an appropriate name. The white dresses cover envy, pride, and sinful lust. Lancelot sits enthroned in Arthur's golden chair sick at heart,

„sighing wearily, as one

Who sits and gazes on a faded fire,

When all the goodlier guests are past away.“

And who wins the prize of Innocence? Tristram, the man whom no vow can bind, who has, after a few months of rapture, forsaken his sweet young wife Isolt the White of Brittany to return to his old love Isolt the Fair of Ireland, the wife of King

Mark of Cornwall; and for her he receives the ruby necklace of the spotless child out of the hands of Lancelot. No wonder that the heavens send down at last a deluge of rain on the hollow feast, so that at the end of the show one of the ladies mockingly observes:

„Praise the patient saints,
Our one white day of Innocence hath past,
Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt.“

Tristram goes his way riding merrily through endless glades of forest glorying in his health and strength and animal spirits, — the very opposite of Arthur, all flesh, all worldly enjoyment, selfish passion, suffering no restraint on his sovereign will, acknowledging no moral bond of duty or of faith, singing lustily:

„Free love, free field, we love but while we may,
New life, new love, to suit the newer day!“

He reaches Tintagil Castle high on a rock on the Cornish coast in the absence of King Mark whilst the sun is setting in the Western-Sea; and there in the casement of her bower in a halo of golden sunlight he finds his love, Isolt the Queen. And so these lovers meet, one faithless to her hated and hateful husband, the other faithless to his sweet and obedient wife, a meeting full of bitter reproaches and passionate reconciliations. The brutal and unscrupulous selfishness which makes him say to the very lady at whose feet he lies:

„May God be with thee, sweet, when old and gray,
And past desire!“ —

represents the deepest fall of Arthur's heroes; but he too quotes the example of Lancelot and Guinevere to exculpate himself, and he too feels the moral grandeur of Arthur as Milton's Satan that of the Almighty: —

„Man, is he man at all?“ methought, when first
I rode from our rough Lyonesse, and beheld
That victor of the Pagan throned in hall —
His hair, a sun that ray'd from off a brow
Like hillsnow high in heaven, the steel-blue eyes,
The golden beard that clothed his lips with light, —
— — he seem'd to me no man,
But Michael trampling Satan; so I sware,
Being amazed.“

In the mean time the sun kisses the horizon. Tristram has risen to wind the ruby carcanet, the prize of innocence. around the white neck of Isolt. when — like a horrid night-mare — Mark rises behind them: „Mark's way!“ the demon shrieks, his sword flashes in the air, and Tristram lies on the floor a senseless corpse.

That same night when Arthur returns home from the victorious overthrow of the rebels, he finds Guinevere's rooms empty and wrapt in darkness, and his Fool sobbing at his feet on the doorsteps of her bower —

„I am thy fool,
And I shall never make thee smile again.“

10. *Guinevere.* In the tenth idyll the thunderbolt falls at last which has so long been suspended in the air. Modred, the Judas among the apostles of knighthood, who hates Lancelot and the Queen with all the hatred of envious jealousy and wishes moreover to supplant Arthur in the kingdom, has for a long time been watching his opportunity.

The lovers feel that danger is at hand and try again and again to part; but again and again the sweet habit of daily intercourse prevails, and Arthur

„who would against his own eye-witness fain
Have all men true and leal, all women pure“,

himself too nobly confiding to suspect treason in others, leaves them undisturbed. At last they are met for the last time whilst Arthur makes war in the North, and now their hour strikes; for Modred has set his spies, they are surprised together in the Queen's bower, and their shame is manifest. So they part in despair, Lancelot hurrying to his land beyond the sea to prepare for war, in case the offended King should attack him, and Guinevere to hide her guilty head in the nunnery of Almesbury. Here she lives in disguise unknown among the nuns, torn with remorse and loving regret, and daily she must hear herself cursed as the cause of all the misery that has befallen the land. For no sooner had Arthur gone to wage war upon Lancelot, than Modred allied himself with the heathens, the Lords of Hengist, and usurped his uncle's throne. And whilst she broods thus over her misery, now repenting, and now

„Her memory from old habit of the mind
Went slipping back upon the golden days
In which she saw him first, when Lancelot came,
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man“, —

the King arrives in the convent to bid her an eternal farewell.

Guinevere falls at his feet in silent agony, whilst he pronounces judgment over her, more in sorrow than in bitterness; and yet the purpose of his life is gone, his glorious Table Round is broken up, part of the knights siding with Lancelot, others with Modred. The former he has overthrown in a bloody war, the latter he will have to fight in a battle the issue of which is doubtful. So he is sick of life and all through her fault, and yet he forgives her, however he will never see her again, unless they should meet in heaven. And so he rides away having recommended her with solemn words to the nuns of Almesbury; and whilst he departs, Guinevere rushes to the window to see him disappear ghostlike in the mist that enshrouds the mournful winter landscape. Now that it is too late, she understands his true worth and loves him at last, loves him in despair

„Ah great and gentle lord,
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint
Among his warring senses, to thy knights —
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that took
Full easily all impressions from below,
Would not look up, or half-despised the height
To which I would not or I could not climb —
I thought I could not breathe in that fine air
That pure severity of perfect light —
I wanted warmth and colour which I found
In Lancelot — now I see what thou art,
Thou art the highest and most human too,
Not Lancelot, nor another.“

So she resigns this world for ever, becoming a nun, and afterwards abbess of the convent; and after three years of repentance she died, — as Lancelot had died before her „a holy man“.

11. *The Passing of Arthur.* In the eleventh idyll we follow the great King to his last hour; he is the one figure that stands out in solitary grandeur in this last and most beautiful poem.

The hostile armies meet in Lyonesse, on the seashore of Cornwall on a cold and dreary winter day, the last day of the dying year. A strange mist and haze hangs over the whole scene and lends to the weird struggle a dim and unearthly character, reminding us of the fight of the dead in the Battle of the Huns in Kaulbach's famous picture. At last the fierce struggle ceases.

„Last, as by some one deathbed after wail
Of suffering, silence follows, or thro' death
Or deathlike swoon, thus over all that shore,
Save for some whisper of the seething seas,
A dead hush fell.“

Then a cold northwind springs up and drives away the mist, and the seashore is seen and the waves swaying up and down the bodies of the slain; and none are left but Modred on one side, and Arthur with his oldest knight Sir Bedivere on the other. Then Arthur rushes at Modred and kills him, but receives at the same time so terrible a wound in the head that he feels his life ebbing away. Then Sir Bedivere bore him to a lonely chapel

„A broken chancel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land:
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.“

There-upon the King bethought himself of his sword Excalibur with its twofold inscription: Take me, and Throw me away, and he charged Sir Bedivere to take it and fling it into the lake at the foot of the neck of land on which the chapel stood, and to return to tell him what befell. And twice Sir Bedivere deceived the King, for when he saw the precious hilt with its diamonds of priceless worth glitter in the light of the moon, he could not persuade himself to throw it into the lake, but hid it in the reeds and told the king, that he had obeyed his behest, but that no answer came from the deep.

„I heard the water lapping on the crag,
And the long ripple washing in the reeds.“

At last the King's wrath was kindled and he threatened to kill the faithless knight with the last strength left to him, if he did not obey. Then Sir Bedivere went and flung the sword into the lake, and like a streamer of the northern light it shot through the nightly air. But before it touched the water an arm rose from the deep

„Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful“,
caught it, brandished it three times, then disappeared with it.

Then the King was satisfied; but feeling the end approach he bade Sir Bedivere to carry him down the crags to the edge of the water. And kneeling on one knee the knight

„O'er both his shoulders drew the languid hands,
And rising bore him thro' the place of tombs“,

whilst the King „looked wistfully with wide blue eyes
As in a picture.“

So Sir Bedivere hurried down the echoing rocks

„Clothed with his breath, and looking, as he walk'd,
Larger than human on the frozen hills“;

and at last he reached the bottom of the hill, when on a sudden there appeared —

„the level lake,

And the long glories of the winter moon.“

Then a black barge hove in sight approaching the shore and filled with stately forms all dressed in black and in their midst

„Three Queens with crowns of gold: and from them rose

A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,

And, as it were one voice, an agony

Of lamentation.“

In that barge the King was placed and his head was laid in the lap of the fairest and most majestic of those Queens. Then Bedivere complained in wild despair:

„And now the whole Round Table is dissolved

Which was an image of the mighty world;

And I, the last, go forth companionless,

And the days darken round me, and the years,

Among new men, strange faces, other minds.“

Slowly and with difficulty Arthur answers words of consolation

„the old order changeth, yielding place to new,

And God fulfils himself in many ways.“

And he concludes with the following words:

„Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer

Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice

Rise like a fountain for me night and day.

For what are men better than sheep or goats

That nourish a blind life within the brain,

If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer

Both for themselves and those who call them friend?

For so the whole round earth is every way

Bound by gold chains about the feet of God,

But now farewell. I am going a long way

With these thou seest — if indeed I go

(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt) —

To the island-valley of Avilion;

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,

Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies

Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard-lawns

And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,

Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.“

Then the boat set sail and started; and Sir Bedivere climbed higher and higher to follow it with his eyes, and once it seem'd there came, but faint

„As from beyond the limit of the world,

Like the last echo born of a great cry,

Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice

Around a King returning from his wars.“

At last the barge disappeared,

„And the new sun rose bringing the new year.“

Some observations on Tennyson's Idylls.

The impression which Tennyson's Idylls leave behind on the mind of the reader is that of pessimistic melancholy. A great and noble hero has for a time succeeded in working out his ideal of man in the most difficult material, the souls of his fellow beings; there is indeed a moment when all the knights of the Round Table „bear the likeness of the King“. But the moment passes. The resistance of matter, of the flesh, grows stronger every day, until at last every spark of ideal life is quenched in the body of Arthur's knighthood; another illustration of Goethe's famous words:

„Dem Herrlichsten, was auch der Geist empfangen,
Drängt immer fremd und fremder Stoff sich an;
Wenn wir zum Guten dieser Welt gelangen,
So heisst das Bess're Trug und Wahn;
Die uns das Leben gaben, herrliche Gefühle,
Erstarren in dem irdischen Gewühle.“

A glorious world disappears in the rising flood of sin and wickedness, and nothing remains but a blank. We look into an empty future. In this pessimistic view of life Tennyson shows himself a child of his time; how different is this end from that planned by Spenser for his Fairy Queen, which was to end with the realisation of the perfect ideal through the marriage of Arthur and Gloriana; different also from Shakespeare's dramas which always open up to us, beyond the wreck and ruin of a shattered world, the happy prospect of a brighter and better future, as in King Lear, in Macbeth, and in Romeo and Juliet. It is true the idylls close with the words:

„And the new sun rose bringing the new year“,

but it shines only on a broken down and despairing old man. This Bedivere will, like the one high column in Uhland's poem, bear witness to the grandeur of the edifice that lies in ruin, but tottering like that column he will soon fall, and nothing will be left. Thus we miss in Tennyson's poem that invigorating breath that would nerve us for the battle of life which in our opinion even tragedy should impart to us; and thus also this great and noble poem bears in a certain sense the stamp of the Pessimistic age which has produced the Fall of Walhalla in Wagner's Götterdämmerung.

If we may venture another criticism it is this that Modred, the evil genius of the Table Round, has been kept too much in the background considering the important part he plays. The poet represents him from the outset as an eaves-dropper and a coward, envious of all that is bright and noble; but he never lets us look into the secret workings of his soul; we do not understand its development and its motives, nor can we account for the great influence he exercises over a large party which is strong enough to overthrow Arthur's power. It is strange that Tennyson has neglected to attribute to him the powerful motive by which he is impelled in the story of Sir Thomas Malory viz. love of Guinevere.

After these observations I turn with pleasure to the consideration of the great beauties of Tennyson's work. And here I prize most highly his magic power of informing this wonderful world of medieval romance with lifelike reality even for the modern reader. This is due for a great part to his masterly delineation of character. We admire the great variety of clearly marked types of heroes in whom we see the ideal char-

acter of Arthur as their conscience struggle more or less successfully with their baser nature, — so the white sunlight shining through the prism is broken in many colours. The centre of interest is undoubtedly Lancelot, fully able of sympathising with the noble mission of the King, nay his chief instrument in working it out, but fatally drawn down to the earth by the irresistible passion which is his destiny. Of whitest purity are Galahad and Percivale, but these do not follow out the King's intentions; bent on their own salvation they abandon the higher task of coming to the rescue of their fellow creatures on this side the grave. The opposite extreme of these are: Tristram, the man of glowing sensuality like Tannhäuser, with the gift of keenly enjoying all the sweets of life, the ardent lover of the greenwood, of the wild chase, of the fierce battle, of passionate minstrelsy, of the charms of woman, but utterly selfish and unprincipled; and light-headed and pleasure-loving Gawaine, forgetful of his duty to his friend at the feet of a lovely woman, but faithful to his King even to his death in the war against Modred. Truthful and generous, devoted to bright honour and glory after the heart of Arthur is Gareth with his boyish heart full of trust and poetry. Victims of the poison that gradually destroys their peace of mind are: Geraint, who is however healed through faithful Enid; Pelleas, who is driven to madness, and Balin who dies in despair at having lost the loadstar of his life. Masterly are Tennyson's descriptions of female characters. The centre of interest is Guinevere whom we learn to pity as well as to blame; for even before the discovery of her crime and her penance at Almesbury her guilty pleasures are harrassed by perpetual fear of disclosure, by bitter remorse, and fierce jealousy. Her sinful life is a pretext and a palliation for passionate Isolt who may moreover plead in her excuse the hateful character of her husband; for base Vivien whose crime is inspired by jealous vanity; and for Ettarre who, wearied with purity and innocence, longs for the excitements of passion and intrigue; Guinevere moreover bears the guilt of Enid's sufferings and of Elaine's death. The character and story of Elaine is perhaps the master-piece of the poet. It would be difficult to find in literature a tale of simpler and at the same time more touching pathos than that of the death and last journey of the Lily Maid of Astolat.

In the second place, Tennyson's success lies in his power of description; indeed he is a great painter. The blind fury of the desperate onset, the dazzling glitter of the tournament, the rich banquet, the prancing war-steed, the flashing armour of the knight, the beauty and gay magnificence of the ladies live before us in colours no less bright and glowing than in the immortal pages of Ariosto, whilst he vies with a Turner in the representation of fantastic architecture or fairylike landscape. Fascinating are his descriptions of the magic effects of light and shade in the English landscape. The glowing sun setting in the rolling waves of the Atlantic, the weird glamour of the sunlit mountain-mist, the glories of the summer-noon bursting victoriously through the leafy shades of the thickest wood, and the calm majesty of the moonlit sea in a clear winter-night are brought out with marvelous distinctness in the poet's word-paintings.

And yet the principal charm of Tennyson's poem does not lie in these descriptions but in the human interest excited by the beings that move through these enchanted scenes. And here I come to the great difference between Tennyson and his predecessors. He dispenses almost entirely with supernatural agencies; where they appear at all, they

remain in the background and are treated as legends and traditions of uncertain character, nor do they exercise any influence on the actions of the heroes. We have got rid for once of monsters and giants, fairies and wizards, dragons and lions, enchanted fountains, love-potions, and transformations, of supernatural strength and invulnerability, in short of the whole stock in trade of medieval romance. The interest excited by the subject is purely human and psychological; in fact the poet has shown great tact in putting the story of the Table Round before the modern reader in the only shape in which he can find it palatable, nay captivating, in the shape of a psychological problem. It is characteristic of this treatment that the Holy Grail which is the Keystone of the whole fabric of the Arthurian Legend in Medieval Romance, has been represented by Tennyson as a kind of ignis fatuus that draws the traveler through the wild forest of life away from the right path; his Arthur, though an enthusiast and an idealist, is a practical social reformer, whose doings and strivings concern this nether world; what lies beyond its bounds troubles him as little as it does Goethe's Faust. This is the most modern and the most original feature of the poem and here lies the secret of its charm for the modern reader.

How Tennyson used his sources.

In order fully to appreciate Tennyson's genius we need only study the sources from which he drew his subject. In the Idylls we travel through the same scenes as in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, but in the latter we see them under a grey sky in dull monotony, in Tennyson's poem the sun has burst forth and has kissed them into life and beauty. Sometimes a few lines in Malory's book have suggested to Tennyson the idea on which he has built up a splendid tale; thus the little drama of Merlin's Death is based on the following passage in Malory: „Soon after the lady and Merlin departed; and by the way as they went, Merlin shewed her many wonders, and came into Cornwall. And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her to himself, and she was ever passing merry of him, and fain would have been delivered of him, for she was afraid of him, because he was a devil's son, and she could not put him away by any means. And so upon a time it happened that Merlin shewed to her in a rock what was a great wonder, and wrought by enchantment, which went under a stone. So by her subtle craft and working, she made Merlin to go under that stone, to let her know of the marvels there, but she wrought so there for him that he came never out, for all the craft that he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin.“

On other occasions the modern poet shows his skill in slight alterations or omissions. In Malory's book Pelleas when cruelly slighted by Ettarre suffers himself finally to be consoled by another lady, and so the tragic point of the story is blunted. In the story of Elaine Tennyson has added the striking character of the dumb servitor who steers the barge that bears the dead maiden up to Arthur's palace. Moreover in Malory's tale it is the King and Guinevere who see the barge come up with the tide from the oriel window of the castle, — a merely accidental meeting of husband and wife; the magnificent scene of the meeting of the guilty lovers, the jealous wrath of Guinevere, the loss of the diamonds are Tennyson's additions. The Last Tournament is Tennyson's own work, Malory only supplies one striking incident, the death of Tristram,

in the following words: „By Sir Tristram I may have a warning, said Sir Lancelot. For when by means of the treatise Sir Tristram brought again La Beale Isond unto King Mark from Joyous Gaurd, look what fell on the end, how shamefully that false traitor (King Mark) slew that noble knight as he sat harping before his lady La Beale Isond, with a sharp grounded glaive thrust him behind the heart.“

The most important omission which Tennyson has made is that of the trial of Guinevere and of its consequences. Malory narrates, that though Arthur was more sorry for the loss of his powerful friend Lancelot than angry at his wife's faithlessness, he could not but condemn her to death. But when she was about to be burnt, Lancelot appeared and delivered her with great slaughter; also Gareth, Gawaine's brother, died in the battle. And though Arthur would fain have been reconciled with Lancelot, whose help he could not dispense with, Gawaine would not listen to such proposals but insisted on being avenged on Lancelot. So, although at the interference of the Pope Lancelot has brought back Guinevere, Arthur and Gawaine follow him into France and lay siege to his castle. In the mean time Modred has raised the standard of rebellion in England. He spreads a report that Arthur is dead, he is crowned King, and urges Guinevere to marry him. But the Queen throws herself into the Tower of London and holds out against the attacks of the usurper. The news of Modred's rebellion calls Arthur back to England; a great battle is fought near Dover between the two rivals, in which Gawaine falls. When he is on the point of death he writes a letter to Lancelot to summon him to the assistance of the King against the traitor, but the die is cast before Lancelot arrives on the scene. Both Modred and Arthur fall in a great battle near Salisbury, and Lancelot retires into a convent.

Nearly all these events Tennyson has rejected, or only occasionally hinted at; probably because in these scenes Arthur is thrown into the back-ground by his great peers, Lancelot and Gawaine, and because moreover his feelings in regard to the treason of Guinevere are unworthy of a great and lofty soul. It is to be regretted that Tennyson thus lost the opportunity of working out more carefully the character and part of Modred; we should then understand his motives and see in him a formidable rival, nay a foe worthy of even Arthur's steel. But Tennyson preferred to sacrifice this opportunity in order to let his great hero stand forth in solitary grandeur at the end of his poem, thus concentrating upon him the undivided interest of the reader.

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